

Our True Colors

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD January 23, 2022

Always in living our best lives we need a true connection with our core – an understanding and an appreciation for all that we hold within us. We can gift ourselves a regular pause to check in with all that lies within. To me, this truth is held in my heart, and the pause is in connecting with what I call our “heart space” – our inner truth. Sometimes within we feel a heaviness – a weight. Where does this come from? I think of a deep connection between our true selves and where we focus our intentions – that ultimate need to make sure our inner being is expressed in how we live each day of our precious lives – from birth to death. Perhaps that heaviness inside, or, in contrast, that emptiness, arises when the way we are living our lives is not true to that core, but true to expectations and norms and pressure from all that is around us, or even within our subconscious. We can stop where we are, settle in, place our hands on our chest and listen to what that space is telling us. This is what I do when faced with a challenging decision. Author Dawna Markova, in reflecting on true intention, and thus experiencing a “lived life,” writes of our hearts transforming to “a wing, a torch, a promise.”¹ Our heart as a wing – light and lively and free. Or a torch – warm and offering that light that serves to guide us through the unknown. Or a promise – the promise that, no matter what, if we connect with all that is held within, we will be ok.

When have you felt this freedom? When has your heart taken flight? Society has norms, our families have expectations, often we place undue pressure on ourselves to achieve a life that in thought is ideal but in practice is stifling. When we give ourselves permission to break away, we can find our truth – which may be in alignment with much of our current state of being or may not. We can engage with deep, life orienting questions - what religion or theology or idea of the sacred rings true to our lived experiences? What sexuality or gender identity do we hold in our core? What do we want to do with this limited time we have? And what is beautiful and

¹ “I Will Not Die an Unlived Life” Dawna Markova

what is inspiring and what is freeing is that each of our cores is entirely unique and true to each individual. As Rumi, a Sufi mystic, expressed, “What seems wrong to you is right for [another]. What is poison to one is honey to someone else.”² Even without such stark dichotomies lie fundamental differences between each individual. I think of the beauty held in the differences of the world’s religions. Or the distinction between those passions that guide our service to the world, pursuing the well-being of all forms of aching people and all variations of life found on this planet we call home. Our differences sustain each other.

I reflect on the words and thoughts of Lao Tzu, Chinese philosopher and founder of philosophical Taoism. “At the center of your being, you have the answer; you know who you are, and you know what you want.”³ At the heart of Taoism is the belief and conviction to live in harmony with the Tao – that source of all that exists – and in doing so, we need to know ourselves. What rings true across these Eastern and Western ideas is that knowing the answer to our questions of self is a necessity. At times this is a way to filter our daily decisions. At others, it means making decisions that alter the course of our lives.

It’s not always easy to know ourselves. It may take years or even decades to unearth some of our inner truths. As such, falling into the crowd, or into the false yet powerful expectations of ourselves or of others becomes a simple trap to ensnare us, caught in a cage where achievement is of utmost importance, or money is our guiding light, or prestige is the key to a complete existence. While elements of these ideas may be honey for some, they are poison to others. Crafting a life based on inner truth begs for purposeful intention. And with purpose, focus. When reflecting on what is most important, homing in on those one or two or three things that help define who we are. When altering the course of our lives, centering our focus on those few and true decisions that are of significance.

² Jalāl ad-Dīn Mohammad Rumi

³ From *Soul Matters Worship Packet: Living with Intention*, quote by Lao Tzu

And yet let us not slip into a self-centered life, where personal desires place self above all others in our interdependent web. For part of each life is service, offering our unique gifts to the world around us, bettering the world in ways that ring true to our hearts. Helping others so that everyone can thrive – sustaining and enriching the garden of humanity, all different colors and shapes and sizes, making sure each flower has what it needs to survive so that the beauty of one accentuates the beauty of another – each one knowing their true identity – the tulip a confident tulip, the daffodil a radiant daffodil.

Our Story for All Ages reminds us of the Buddhist wisdom that we are never unobserved, for we are each constantly observing ourselves.⁴ We can never hide wrongdoings. When we choose goodness and love, our inner selves rejoice. When choosing harm, no matter how small, we know this as well, and we'll have to grapple with this. Let this be an invitation to shape our lives so that as we observe ourselves, we are filled with joy and delight and pride! In watching ourselves we hold ourselves accountable to each action and each decision. We can craft our actions to reflect our core, knowing what is right and what is wrong, what is poison and what is honey.

Living true to ourselves takes courage. I think of the one who suffers from addiction entering a 12-step group. A young adult breaking away from the expectations of those who raised them. A person facing mortality deciding what to do with their remaining time on this planet. Even simpler changes require strength in the face of the unknown. We are called by our core to do all we can to break out of that trap we reflected on earlier – freeing ourselves from the confines of expectations in the face of the truth within us.

Author Dawna Markova writes, “When the inner walls to your soul are graffitied with advertisements, commercials, and the opinions of everyone who has ever known and labeled you, turning inwards requires nothing less than a major clean-up.”⁵ I hold true to this idea of

⁴ From *Soul Matters Worship Packet: Living with Intention* “The Wise Teachers Test” adapted from a Jataka tale

⁵ *I Will Not Die an Unlived Life: Reclaiming Purpose and Passion* by Dawna Markova

letting go of the opinions of others as a way of releasing the inauthentic. All that people say of us can become our truth, when in fact they are simply uninformed opinions lacking nuance and compassion. Let this go. That graffiti of advertisements and commercials on our souls – that perfect, unachievable idea of superficial beauty, the ideal fulfilled life being one with major achievements or an abundance of wealth. Let us redefine beauty. Let us redefine achievement and wealth. I can think of nothing more beautiful or worthwhile than the soul of a person who knows who they are and commits themselves to this sacred truth – cleaning up all that obstructs the soul. You know you. Deep within, you know you.

And when we make these decisions that alter the course of our lives, we are transitioning from the known to the unknown. Even if we understand the unknown will be better, it often feels easier and safer to hold on to what we have and stay where we are. In anthropology we call this the liminal space – that space between two different identities – marked by ambiguity, straddling a threshold. Author Dawna Markova calls this “crossing an abyss of emptiness” – that same “disorientation” and “confusion” some might find in a liminal period of one’s lifetime. And yet – we can approach this unknown with “curiosity,” with a sense of “playfulness.”⁶ Our identities, both what we hold within and how we express ourselves in the world may, with some fear and a helping of anxiety, change – and we can rejoice in this. This is where we find our purpose. This is where we find our passion.

Growing up I liked playing the game of naming my future children. I talked with my mom about affectionate names she might like to be called by her future grandchildren. One year, my sister gave me an unfinished knitted scarf as a Christmas present, and we smilingly and tenderly set it aside for my future child. Whenever envisioning my future, children were always present. And this truth remained with me as I got married and finished my education. This truth remained with me as I looked for a job, researched school districts, and had conversations with my mom about her moving to Maryland to live with my husband and me – a husband who would be content with children or without children. Finally, in my third decade, the life I had always

⁶ *I Will Not Die an Unlived Life: Reclaiming Purpose and Passion* by Dawna Markova

anticipated was set to begin. And with that realization that it was the time, my inner truth was triggered, and my body suddenly felt struck – and everything changed. It wasn't a feeling of fear or anxiety for what lay ahead, but a realization – a truth I finally gave myself permission to listen to – that I wasn't a mother – I wasn't meant to be a mother. I entered the “abyss of emptiness”⁷ between these two truths and in that emptiness faced grief for the life I was giving up and, in that emptiness, I felt truer to myself than I had ever been. My body gave a sigh of relief, letting go of an unwanted expectation I had held within me for decades. I realized motherhood wasn't what I wanted, but what I expected of myself, what I thought my life should be and would be since a very tender young age. And in realizing that, and in grieving that, I feel a calm and a peace inside that I am living the exact life I am supposed to be living, and I am still thrown some days in this new, beautiful space of peace and certainty. When I touch my chest and settle in my heart space, I feel that my heart has wings. I feel that promise that everything will be ok. And it is.

This is the trajectory of our lives – from birth to death. The decisions we make to be true to ourselves are as important to us in our youth and young adult years as they are in our ninth decade – if we make it that far. It is so important to find our truth within us and let it guide our intentions to be in alignment with all that we hold dear. Dawna Markova wrote, “There is only enough light to take the journey step by step, but that is all any of us really needs.”⁸ We need to be guided by our hearts, moment by moment, decision by decision. I want to share another truth I hold dear – a truth about the grave. After the death of my stepfather, I visit his grave each time I travel to my home state of New Jersey. And when I sit by that strip of grass, I can think with contentment that he lived his best life, and I feel he was at peace when his life ended. When I was younger, I made a promise to myself, one that may seem morbid but that in reality is quite beautiful: no matter when I died, young or old, I wanted to be content with the life I lived. And I remind myself of that commitment from time to time. And if I am veering off course, I make a change. And if I feel content, I rejoice. I invite you to reflect on that

⁷ *I Will Not Die an Unlived Life: Reclaiming Purpose and Passion* by Dawna Markova

⁸ *ibid*

sentiment from time to time. We are always watching ourselves – what can we do to make ourselves proud? What is a life of passion and purpose?

Every time I hear the song “True Colors,” tears come to my eyes. The artist is singing to a beloved who is obviously in a state of despair, lifting up in beautiful melody the words:

I see your true colors
Shining through
I see your true colors
And that's why I love you
So don't be afraid to let them show
Your true colors
True colors are beautiful
Like a rainbow⁹

This is a beautiful expression of that love that emanates for a person and from a person when their true selves are evident – all of who we are at our core is beautiful – let it shine. This is a time to rejoice on our own inherent worth and our own inherent dignity – and to trust that. To trust that heart space within. You are beautiful. And we bring this to the flower garden of all humanity through service, using our strengths and our commitments to better the lives of all of those in our interdependent web – working together so that each person can live a full and meaningful life. If we are in that abyss between the known and the unknown, straddling the threshold between the untrue past and the true future, let us draw strength from our heart which is a flame within, guiding our way through its light. “Don’t be afraid to let them show. Your true colors are beautiful, like a rainbow.”

May it be so, and Amen

⁹ “True Colors” written by Billy Steinberg and Tom Kelly